

"HOW CAN YOU TELL A CHRISTIAN?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 14, 1995

"HOW CAN YOU TELL A CHRISTIAN?"

INTRODUCTION

Today is Mother's Day...a day when we try to remember to show our mothers that they are very, very important to us.

Recently I heard about a mother who had a most revealing experience on her birthday. First-off, her two children insisted and ordered her to stay in bed. She lay there in bed looking forward to her breakfast being brought up to her as the inviting smell of bacon floated up to the bedroom from the kitchen downstairs. After about one hour her children called to her to "come on" downstairs. And there she found them sitting at the table, each with a large plate of bacon and eggs. One of them explained,

"As a birthday surprise, mom...we've cooked our own breakfast"

That says bundles, doesn't it. Who in this world did and does more for us than our mothers? And who in this world is sometimes taken more for granted than our mother? It's only right that we devote a day each year in honor of those wonderful women who have devoted and given so much of themselves to our lives, our families, and yes, to their churches and most importantly to their children. God bless the mothers present this morning...and those who have been....

TODAY'S TEXT

Our text for the day could easily be about being a good mother, but actually it is aimed at the entire Christian family. Here in this 13th chapter of John's Gospel, we sense that Jesus is looking to the Cross where He will glorify God by His perfect obedience to God's plan. Now He is calling His disciples to perfect obedience as well and we ask what is this perfect obedience to which He is calling them? He says to them,

"A new commandment I give to you that you love one another, even as I have loved you...that you also love one another. And by this, all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"

(John 13: 34)

THIS LOVE IS NOT OPTIONAL

Notice, in the first place, that this love of which He is speaking is not something that is optional for the followers of Christ. Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you..." Not a suggestion, not a recommendation, but rather it is a commandment.

Why is it, you may privately ask, why is it a "commandment?" Because... there is a part of every one of us that rebels against the idea of pure and unconditional love. There is a part of us that says such love is out of place in the world in which we live. Those who believe in this kind of love are often called naive...unrealistic. Such, love is great...up to a point...but we want to be sure that we still have some room left inside for some of the baser emotions like anger, resentment and even hate.

I guess you could say we're a bit like the woman who came to Ibn Saud, the man who ruled Saudi Arabia from 1932 to 1953. This story goes that this woman had come to him to demand the death of a man who had killed her husband. The man who was guilty of this heinous crime had been picking dates from a palm tree when he accidentally fell, hitting the woman's husband and fatally injuring him.

Although the king tried to persuade the woman not to pursue her desire for revenge, she nevertheless insisted. And finally the King said,

"It is your right to ask for this man's life, but it is my right to decree how he shall die. You shall take this man with you immediately and he shall be tied to the foot of a palm tree. Then you - yourself - shall climb to the top of the tree and cast yourself down upon him from that height. In that way you will take his life as he took your husband's life."

The woman quickly changed her mind....realizing that in satisfying her need for revenge, she would also be risking her own life.

Ah...but so many of us are like that woman, aren't we? Holding our petty little grudges. Bearing our resentments. Making our spiteful remarks. And always trying to make certain that everybody gets just what they deserve. How alien, pure, sacrificial love is to our lives. And so Jesus, here in this 13th chapter of John's Gospel, is giving us a new commandment - love one another.

LOVE: THE CHRISTIAN'S WITNESS

Let's move on to a second insight, a second point, if you will. We also need to note that love is the Christian's primary witness to the world. How do people know that we are followers of Jesus? Yes - it's by our love. It really doesn't matter how often we get to church. It really doesn't matter how many crosses we wear around our necks. If we cannot love our families and our neighbors and people of every shape and size, of every color and of every background, our Christian faith is suspect....perhaps a bit of a fraud and we are misrepresenting Christ.

Did you happen to see the article in the paper recently about a fake antenna that is on the market for cellular telephones. It costs only nineteen dollars and it gives the appearance of being the real thing, but it's something of a fake. It's for those of us who can't afford a cellular telephone, but don't want their friends to know it. And you know, the amazing thing is that more than two hundred thousand people have bought these fake antennas.

And when I read that article I was reminded of a survey done by a psychology professor at DePaul university. The purpose of this survey was to find out what people think of those who wear glasses. Shoppers in a mall were asked to look at pictures of men and women with and without glasses and then to rate them according to certain characteristics. The results were quite interesting. Men wearing glasses were considered more intelligent and more trustworthy than those without. In the rating of women for intelligence, however, glasses made no difference. But glasses did add an air of financial success to both sexes. Women with glasses were generally considered more competent than those without them. After the survey was completed, you know what this professor did? He went out and bought himself a pair of fake glasses to wear at his counselling sessions. He wanted to look competent, too.

Fake antennas. Fake eye glasses. And what's next? Fake Christianity? Yes, unfortunately....

Here's one that will touch you...

There was this elderly woman who lay seriously ill in a hospital. Her closest friend read her Isaiah 24, verses six through nine...aloud. Wanting the comfort and the support of faith, the sick woman asked her friend to hold her hand. On the other side of the bed, her husband...who considered himself a deeply religious man and who prided himself for his boldness in having a bumper sticker on his rear bumper that read,

"HONK, IF YOU LOVE JESUS....."

reached out and tried to take her other hand, but his wife withdrew it, saying with deep sadness,

"Herbert...you're not a believer.....
Your cruelty and callousness throughout
all the years of our marriage tell me that
your faith is .shallow..not the real thing.."

That hurts. It reminds us that there are some things in life that you just cannot fake. How do people know that we are Christians? By our love, that's it. Love is our primary witness to our faith in Christ. And how sad it is....really....that so many who bear the name of Christ have never come to grips with that one basic, fundamental principle. Are we giving an accurate witness to the love of Jesus? Think about it. Or are we simply sowing seeds of anger, resentment and hatred.

Love is not something that is optional for the follow Jesus. This is the way we let others know to whom we belong, to whom we give our loyalty...it is by how much we love. Nothing else we do matters nearly as much!

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM DETERMINES OUR CAPACITY TO LOVE

And this brings
us to the final

thing I wish to lift up from our text. I think that our ability to love...our capacity to love is derived from our relationship with Christ.

"A new commandment I give to you that you
love one another...even as I have loved
you...that you also love one another...."

We love because He first loved us. A line from First John and the text for the sermon two weeks ago. This is so critical to our understanding of love. Love does not just happen in a vacuum. Love is something that is passed from one person to another. This is one reason Christian parents and particularly Christian mothers are so important. This is why Mother's Day is so important. A child who does not receive love, psychologists tell us, will not be able to give love. There will always be a void there...a terrible void that can never be filled. On the other hand, a child who has received the proper amount of nurturing as an infant and as a toddler will have a sense of security and of trust that will last them an entire lifetime.

And this is also true with regard to this commandment of Christ to love. Many Christians try to keep this commandment without first nurturing their relationship with Him. They're doomed to fail. We draw our ability to love from our connection to Him. And without that connection our faith is simply something of an exercise in "noble living". It has no real power to draw us out of ourselves and center us in others.

Let me tell you about a woman who, I feel, understood that kind of love. Her story is told in a book called, Many Are Called, by Doug Peterson.

Her name is Gladys Aylward. She apparently was an English missionary in China years ago. The church ruler for that region of China, called a Mandarin, assigned Gladys to be the official "foot inspector" for that region. Now, I don't believe that we have foot inspectors any more, although one never knows... there may be some hidden somewhere away in the budget of the Federal Government.

Gladys's task was to inspect the feet of young Chinese girls to make sure their feet were not bound. Foot binding ranks as one of the most severe traditions ever imposed on women. As recently as the middle of this century, the feet of many young Chinese girls were bound...in ten foot bandages wrapped in such a way that all toes except the big toe were pulled underneath the foot. The bandage was then wrapped around the heel so tightly that the sole was drawn as close to the heel as possible. The purpose of this measure was to create a much shorter foot.

Gladys was stunned at this assignment. She was not Chinese. She was a missionary. How could she ever serve as an official foot inspector? People would never listen to her. Some of them called her a foreign devil! But the Mandarin was determined. He carefully explained the job to her. She would travel throughout the countryside, with the protection of armed guards, and tell villagers that foot binding was now illegal.

Gladys initially resisted this assignment, but it suddenly came to her that travelling from village to village under the Mandarin's protection would give her the chance to tell more people about Jesus. She responded to the Mandarin in this way:

"You must realize, Excellency, that if I accept this position I shall try to convert the people of this province to Christianity wherever I go!"

When the Mandarin fell silent, Gladys feared that she had gone too far, but then he answered softly:

"I care nothing for your religion or to whom you preach. This is a matter for the conscience of each individual. But it is important that you should do this work."

And so she did. At first people reacted to Gladys with a nervous wariness. With a crowd behind her, Gladys marched to the nearest house where she found a girl about three years of age. Pointing to the girl, she commanded,

"That's one! Unbind her feet!" With the bandages off, Gladys moved to her knees, pried the toes of this little three year old girl away from the sole of her foot and massaged them slowly and tenderly. "Five little piggies all ready to go to market".... smiled Gladys and the atmosphere suddenly lightened.

The little girl was delighted. Women of varying ages immediately pushed

forward, all of them chattering about the pain they had endured for so many years. Gladys Aylward was quickly promoted from a "foreign devil" to a person of great honor.

And then when the Japanese invaded China in 1941, Gladys Aylward helped more than a hundred children escape in a treacherous journey through the mountains. They made that journey on foot. Feet unbound!

Gladys Aylward knew how to love. She had been commanded to love by the word of the Lord who had sent her into the mission field. She really had no other option. This was her witness to the world...a witness to the love she had received from Christ. It happened to her. It happens to people even today. Perhaps it will happen to someone present here this morning.

Said Jesus,

"A new commandment I give to you...that you love one another, even as I have loved you...that you also love one another. By this all men know that you are my disciples...if you LOVE one another".

PRAYER

Move in our hearts in these quiet moments, O God, as we once again receive Your word and Your blessing. Wrestle with us in the dark and hidden corners of our lives and bring us out into the sunshine of Your love. And help us to share that love with others. In His name we pray. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, May 14, 1995

VISITORS / GREETING

We greet the visitors who have joined us here this morning....and do hope that we shall have the opportunity to greet you in a more personal way following the service - either at the door or downstairs at the coffee hour where....

Be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card or sign one of the Guest Books out there in the narthex before you depart. Come, worship with us....come, work with us in the outreach concerns of our parish.

We've been doing the "Lord's Work" here since 1837....at this busy corner of His Kingdom. This is the fourth building out of which this Methodist congregation has ministered. We minister here in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet you on this Mother's Day.

Members: we remind you to wear your name tag downstairs and to go out of your way to make some new friends in the moments we're together.

PARISH CONCERNS

The parish concerns are there for you in the bulletin. Review them on your own in these moments..noting the meetings schedules for this week....as well as "HOUNDS OF HEAVEN" on Tuesday evening....and a mid-week prayer gathering on Wednesday at 6:30 under Bill Bonwitt's direction. And Saturday is the day of our SPRING RUMMAGE SALE...LEND A HAND.

New members will be received into the church next Sunday. We have a nice group planning to join...and there may be others tempted to strengthen some ties with this church this Spring. Share word with me if you'd like to be included...or with Mr. Bonwitt. Remember those words of Wesley:

"IF YOUR HEART IS AS MY HEART IS...THEN
GIVE ME YOUR HAND...."

Indeed...hearts and hands are needed to keep the churches of this - this church - alive and active and strong.

Also next Sunday, we'll be celebrating ART CONNECTION III...and Jean Laupus is serving as coordinator for it....paintings, sculpture and also some finger food at the gathering after church. And remember, too....next Sunday we'll have the joy of welcoming Duane and Brenda Thompson back to our church. Our former Student Assistant, Duane is now serving a church in Pittsburg....coming to the end of his first year there....having graduated from UTS last May about this time.

TODAY

For many years we have celebrated Mother's Day in our Church and in our conference by receiving a special offering for the Health Care Agencies of the NY Annual Conference...of which there are seven. We hope you will respond with a special LOVE GIFT....and help us reach our goal of \$ 500. The envelopes will be in the pews the next three Sundays...

OFFERING

Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than it is
to receive....."

In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering, - our
gifts and our tithes.....

ROSES ON ALTAR

You'll note that there are two roses on the
altar celebrating the birth of twins to the daughter of
Jeanne Martini....(youngest looking grandmother I know!)..... and do give our
love and best wishes to your daughter, EVA MARIE....in Arizona on the birth
of Elizabeth Grace and Jeremy....April 20th....six pounds each!

2.

"HOW CAN YOU TELL A CHRISTIAN?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 14, 1995

"HOW CAN YOU TELL A CHRISTIAN?"

INTRODUCTION

Today is Mother's Day...a day when we try to remember to show our mothers that they are very important to us.

Recently I heard about a mother who had a most revealing experience on her birthday. First-off, her two children insisted and ordered her to stay in bed. She lay there in bed looking forward to her breakfast being brought up to her as the inviting smell of bacon floated up to the bedroom from the kitchen downstairs. After about one hour her children called to her to "come on" downstairs. And there she found them sitting at the table, each with a large plate of bacon and eggs. One of them explained,

"As a birthday surprise, mom...we've cooked our own breakfast"

That says bundles, doesn't it. Who in this world did and does more for us than our mothers? And who in this world is sometimes taken more for granted than our mother? It's only right that we devote a day each year in honor of those wonderful women who have devoted and given so much of themselves to our lives, our families, and yes, to their churches and most importantly to their children.

TODAY'S TEXT

Our text for the day could easily be about being a good mother, but actually it is aimed at the entire Christian family. Here in this 13th chapter of John's Gospel, we sense that Jesus is looking to the Cross where He will glorify God by His perfect obedience to God's plan. Now He is calling His disciples to perfect obedience as well and we ask what is this perfect obedience to which He is calling them? He says to them,

"A new commandment I give to you that you love one another, even as I have loved you...that you also love one another. And by this, all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"

(John 13: 34)

THIS LOVE IS NOT OPTIONAL

Notice, in the first place, that this love of which He is speaking is not something that is optional for the followers of Christ. Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you..." Not a suggestion, not a recommendation, but rather it is a commandment.

Why is it, you may privately ask, why is it a "commandment?" Because... there is a part of every one of us that rebels against the idea of pure and unconditional love. There is a part of us that says such love is out of place in the world in which we live. Those who believe in this kind of love are often called naive...unrealistic. Such, love is great...up to a point...but we want to be sure that we still have some room left inside for some of the baser emotions like anger, resentment and even hate.

I guess you could say we're a bit like the woman who came to Ibn Saud, the man who ruled Saudi Arabia from 1932 to 1953. This story goes that this woman had come to him to demand the death of a man who had killed her husband. The man who was guilty of this heinous crime had been picking dates from a palm tree when he accidentally fell, hitting the woman's husband and fatally injuring him.

Although the king tried to persuade the woman not to pursue her desire for revenge, she nevertheless insisted. And finally the King said,

"It is your right to ask for this man's life, but it is my right to decree how he shall die. You shall take this man with you immediately and he shall be tied to the foot of a palm tree. Then you - yourself - shall climb to the top of the tree and cast yourself down upon him from that height. In that way you will take his life as he took your husband's life."

The woman quickly changed her mind....realizing that in satisfying her need for revenge, she would also be risking her own life.

Ah...but so many of us are like that woman, aren't we? Holding our petty little grudges. Bearing our resentments. Making our spiteful remarks. And always trying to make certain that everybody gets just what they deserve. How alien, pure, sacrificial love is to our lives. And so Jesus, here in this 13th chapter of John's Gospel, is giving us a new commandment - love one another.

LOVE: THE CHRISTIAN'S WITNESS

Let's move on to a second insight, a second point, if you will. We also need to note that love is the Christian's primary witness to the world. How do people know that we are followers of Jesus? Yes - it's by our love. It really doesn't matter how often we get to church. It really doesn't matter how many crosses we wear around our necks. If we cannot love our families and our neighbors and people of every shape and size, of every color and of every background, our Christian faith is suspect....perhaps a bit of a fraud and we are misrepresenting Christ.

Did you happen to see the article in the paper recently about a fake antenna that is on the market for cellular telephones. It costs only nineteen dollars and it gives the appearance of being the real thing, but it's something of a fake. It's for those of us who can't afford a cellular telephone, but don't want their friends to know it. And you know, the amazing thing is that more than two hundred thousand people have bought these fake antennas.

And when I read that article I was reminded of a survey done by a psychology professor at DePaul university. The purpose of this survey was to find out what people think of those who wear glasses. Shoppers in a mall were asked to look at pictures of men and women with and without glasses and then to rate them according to certain characteristics. The results were quite interesting. Men wearing glasses were considered more intelligent and more trustworthy than those without. In the rating of women for intelligence, however, glasses made no difference. But glasses did add an air of financial success to both sexes. Women with glasses were generally considered more competent than those without glasses. After the survey was completed, you know what this professor did? He went out and bought himself a pair of fake glasses to wear at his counselling sessions. He wanted to look competent, too.

Fake antennas. Fake eye glasses. And what's next? Fake Christianity? Yes, unfortunately....

Here's one that will touch you...

There was this elderly woman who lay seriously ill in a hospital. Her closest friend read her Isaiah 24, verses six through nine...aloud. Wanting the comfort and the support of faith, the sick woman asked her friend to hold her hand. On the other side of the bed, her husband...who considered himself a deeply religious man and who prided himself for his boldness in having a bumper sticker on his rear bumper that read,

"HONK, IF YOU LOVE JESUS....."

reached out and tried to take her other hand, but his wife withdrew it, saying with deep sadness,

"Herbert...you're not a believer.....
Your cruelty and callousness throughout
all the years of our marriage tell me that
your faith is an illusion...."

That hurts. It reminds us that there are some things in life that you just cannot fake. How do people know that we are Christians? By our love, that's it. Love is our primary witness to our faith in Christ. And how sad it is....really....that so many who bear the name of Christ have never come to grips with that one basic, fundamental principle. Are we giving an accurate witness to the love of Jesus? Think about it. Or are we simply sowing seeds of anger, resentment and hatred.

Love is not something that is optional for the follow Jesus. This is the way we let others know to whom we belong, to whom we give our loyalty...it is by how much we love. Nothing else we do matters nearly as much!

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM DETERMINES OUR CAPACITY TO LOVE

And this brings us to the final

thing I wish to lift up from our text. I think that our ability to love...our capacity to love is derived from our relationship with Christ.

"A new commandment I give to you that you
love one another...even as I have loved
you...that you also love one another...."

We love because He first loved us. A line from First John and the text for the sermon two weeks ago. This is so critical to our understanding of love. Love does not just happen in a vacuum. Love is something that is passed from one person to another. This is one reason Christian parents and particularly Christian mothers are so important. This is why Mother's Day is so important. A child who does not receive love, psychologists tell us, will not be able to give love. There will always be a void there...a terrible void that can never be filled. On the other hand, a child who has received the proper amount of nurturing as an infant and as a toddler will have a sense of security and of trust that will last them an entire lifetime.

And this is also true with regard to this commandment of Christ to love. Many Christians try to keep this commandment without first nurturing their relationship with Him. They're doomed to fail. We draw our ability to love from our connection to Him. And without that connection our faith is simply something of an exercise in "noble living". It has no real power to draw us out of ourselves and center us in others.

Let me tell you about a woman who, I feel, understood that kind of love. Her story is told in a book called, Many Are Called, by Doug Peterson.

Her name is Gladys Aylward. She apparently was an English missionary in China years ago. The church ruler for that region of China, called a Mandarin, assigned Gladys to be the official "foot inspector" for that region. Now, I don't believe that we have foot inspectors any more, although one never knows... there may be some hidden somewhere away in the budget of the Federal Government.

Gladys's task was to inspect the feet of young Chinese girls to make sure their feet were not bound. Foot binding ranks as one of the most severe traditions ever imposed on women. As recently as the middle of this century, the feet of many young Chinese girls were bound....in ten foot bandages wrapped in such a way that all toes except the big toe were pulled underneath the foot. The bandage was then wrapped around the heel so tightly that the sole was drawn as close to the heel as possible. The purpose of this measure was to create a much shorter foot.

Gladys was stunned at this assignment. She was not Chinese. She was a missionary. How could she ever serve as an official foot inspector? People would never listen to her. Some of them called her a foreign devil! But the Mandarin was determined. He carefully explained the job to her. She would travel throughout the countryside, with the protection of armed guards, and tell villagers that foot binding was now illegal.

Gladys initially resisted this assignment, but it suddenly came to her that travelling from village to village under the Mandarin's protection would give her the chance to tell more people about Jesus. She responded to the Mandarin in this way:

"You must realize, Excellency, that if I accept this position I shall try to convert the people of this province to Christianity wherever I go!"

When the Mandarin fell silent, Gladys feared that she had gone too far, but then he answered softly:

"I care nothing for your religion or to whom you preach. This is a matter for the conscience of each individual. But it is important that you should do this work."

And so she did. At first people reacted to Gladys with a nervous wariness. With a crowd behind her, Gladys marched to the nearest house where she found a girl about three years of age. Pointing to the girl, she commanded,

"That's one! Unbind her feet!" With the bandages off, Gladys moved to her knees, pried the toes of this little three year old girl away from the sole of her foot and massaged them slowly and tenderly. "Five little piggies all ready to go to market".... smiled Gladys and the atmosphere suddenly lightened.

The little girl was delighted. Women of varying ages immediately pushed

forward, all of them chattering about the pain they had endured for so many years. Gladys Aylward was quickly promoted from a "foreign devil" to a person of great honor.

And then when the Japanese invaded China in 1941, Gladys Aylward helped more than a hundred children escape in a treacherous journey through the mountains. They made that journey on foot. Feet unbound!

Gladys Aylward knew how to love. She had been commanded to love by the word of the Lord who had sent her into the mission field. She really had no other option. This was her witness to the world...a witness to the love she had received from Christ. It happened to her. It happens to people even today. Perhaps it will happen to someone present here this morning.

Said Jesus,

"A new commandment I give to you...that you love one another, even as I have loved you...that you also love one another. By this all men know that you are my disciples...if you LOVE one another".

PRAYER

Move in our hearts in these quiet moments, O God, as we once again receive Your word and Your blessing. Wrestle with us in the dark and hidden corners of our lives and bring us out into the sunshine of Your love. And help us to share that love with others. In His name we pray. Amen.